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Aspin Reports On Sverdlovsk Blast

An outbreak of anthrax in Sverdlovsk in the Soviet Union last year was the result of an explosion at a biological warfare laboratory, a report released today by the oversight subcommittee of the House Intelligence Committee says. The report says that as many as 1,000 people may have died as a result of the explosion.

Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.), the subcommittee chairman, charges that the anthrax episode offers persuasive evidence that the Soviets "have cheated on the treaty dealing with biological weapons [the 1975 Biological Weapons Convention]." Aspin further charges that the Carter Administration, which knew about the Sverdlovsk incident, "played it for the galleries, regardless of the impact [of their actions] on the chances for diplomatic success."

However, both the report and Aspin's statement exonerate the Administration of charges of tampering with the intelligence process for political purposes. Such accusations were made because, although information about the incident was available to the intelligence community within a few weeks of the accident, the government did not move on the matter until almost a year later. This led to charges earlier this year that the Administration chose to suppress what it knew for fear it would damage Senate support for SALT II. The report says, however, that "the subcommittee found no persuasive evidence that anyone suppressed intelligence about Sverdlovsk, or that processing and action on this intelligence were delayed for fear of the impact on SALT II ratification."

Aspin makes a more subtle accusation: "The fact is that the United States first approached the Soviets privately through our embassy in Moscow on March 17. Then, one day later and before the Soviets had a chance to respond, we went public with the issue in a formal comment by the Department of State. We went public, moreover, in the middle of an international conference in Geneva, where all the states party to the Convention had gathered to review its progress at the five-year mark, in keeping with a provision of the Convention itself. To say the least, this looks like we intended to embarrass the Soviets and make political capital out of the incident rather than to resolve it."

Officials at the State Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency deny the Aspin charge. They say that it was a wave of leaks of the story to the press that forced them to tip their hand. The press leaks, they say, came coincidentally at the time that the review conference under the 1975 treaty was about to begin. The public statement was necessary, if ill-timed, in order to avoid charges that the Administration was covering up something.

The official Soviet explanation of the Sverdlovsk incident is that tainted meat caused the anthrax outbreak. But the oversight subcommittee says that won't wash. "Information available to the U.S. government indicates that the symptoms displayed by victims in Sverdlovsk were those of inhalation anthrax," the report contends. If the anthrax were of the inhalation (or pulmonary) variety, it could not have been caused by tainted meat. Anthrax can be spread by eating contaminated meat, by skin contact with anthrax spores, or by inhaling the spores. In addition, inhalation anthrax is almost always fatal, while gastric anthrax is not. Inhalation anthrax, the Aspin subcommittee notes, "is the form this disease would take if stimulated by a biological warfare attack with aerosols. It is a form of the disease, moreover, which occurs in nature under only very unusual circumstances—and then not in epidemic proportions."

When the U.S. biological warfare program was in full-swing during the 1950s and 1960s at Ft. Detrick in Maryland, anthrax was one of the more promising weapons. According to sources who worked in the program, many biological agents such as bubonic and pneumonic plague proved difficult to culture and control. But anthrax in aerosol form was rather easy to grow and use.

Based on testimony from a Russian emigre, the Aspin subcommittee concludes that an explosion at Sverdlovsk's Military Compound 19 sent a cloud of anthrax spores into the night. Military Compound 19 is the Soviet equivalent of Ft. Detrick. The general Soviet biological warfare program is under the supervision of Col. Efim Ivanovich Smirnov, head of a military directorate charged with biological warfare research, some forms of which are still permitted under the 1975 convention.

"Winds blew the anthrax south, starting from the location of Compound 19 at the town's outskirts," the report goes on. "Although as many as 1,000 residents of the suburbs may have perished, the epidemic was less severe than if the winds had been blowing towards the center of town. Soviet authorities conducted repeated vaccinations of the populace, explaining at first that nothing was wrong, and later that a 'mistake' had occurred."

On the key question of whether the Sverdlovsk incident constitutes a violation of the convention, the Aspin report waffles. It points out that the section of the convention which exempts production of biological agents used for "prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes" offers a large loophole. In addition, there is nothing in the convention to determine how much of a substance would be more than required for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes.

"Thus," the report says, "the failure of the convention to set a specific standard for violation of its prohibition against acquisition or retention of biological agents leaves to the signatories of the convention the judgment as to whether the epidemic of inhalation anthrax in Sverdlovsk demonstrates a Soviet violation." But, the report concludes, "adequate intelligence is now available to enable political authorities to make a decision on Soviet compliance" with the convention. □